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**Institutional Ethnography:
A Tool for Merging Research and Practice**

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Abstract: Institutional ethnography draws from ethnomethodology focusing on how everyday experience is socially organized. Power is critically important as an analytic focus which crosses boundaries providing researchers a view of social organization that illuminates practices that marginalize.

Introduction

Cunningham (1992) charges adult education has been guilty of excluding the cultural experiences of marginalized people and prescribing a dominant universal perspective for all groups to comply with. Adult education serves as a weapon of social control by supporting dominant white, Western—European culture, maintaining systems of privilege, and by denying the humanity and worth of individuals who fall outside the socially structured norm (Cunningham, 2000). Adult learning theories (behaviorist, humanist, cognitivist, and liberatory) “often exclude the types of learning that best suit some women, people of color, and people from the working class or those who are unemployed” (Amstutz, 1999, p. 19) and have been partially unsuccessful in practice because these theories are derived from the dominant culture .

"Dominant culture determines ‘what is culture’ leaving all else without cultural space. This allows for a monolithic view to become the ‘given’ reality for all those who live in our society” (Rocco & West, 1998, pp. 171-172), negating the unique experiences of those who differ in race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Dominant culture does not just imply power, but implies “oppression, discrimination, and exclusion” (Guy, 1999, p. 11). Mediated by texts and documents and “constituted externally to particular individuals and their personal and familial relationships” (Smith, 1987, p. 3), dominant culture interpenetrates the multiple sites of power and implicates the degree of power persons can appropriate in their homes, communities, jobs, and government. Intersecting across family, work, and community systems, the discourses that sustain the dominant culture set the parameters for a person’s ability or inability to navigate the structural and political subsystems that impact adult learning, educational needs, and participation in educational programs. Discourse transports ideology from individuals to governing bodies, to practices within bureaucratic administration, to extended social relations which are the external contexts that shape and influence adult learning and the practice of adult education.

Throughout history, the marginalization and exclusion of the underprivileged, women, African-Americans, and religious and sexual minorities is evident. Academically, these groups have been silenced, misrepresented, or absent in the production and dissemination of authoritative knowledge. Disciplines of study have validated the writing and speech of certain individuals, giving weight and influence to particular perspectives that maintain dominant

interests, thereby excluding others. Specifically, the scholarship of women adult educators has been excluded from adult education journals and has led to the construction of a body of literature where women's presence has been minimized and their contributions under-valued and under-reported (Thompson & Schied, 1996). The implication is clear and has been advocated within the field of adult education: there is a necessity to develop an analysis of adult education that "encompasses not only social and cultural dimensions but microsocial theories of learning and teaching" (Sissell, 2001, p. 7). Essential to this analysis is a research method that addresses how socio-cultural and political terrains intersect with individual experience. Merging the microsocial context of the learner with the macro social and cultural dimensions that influence learning, teaching, and work is encouraged by practitioners in adult education (Amstutz, 1999; Cunningham, 2000; Ettling, 2001; Heaney, 2000; Sheared, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce institutional ethnography (IE) as an effective research tool useful for investigating oppressive ruling relations that intersect institutional and cultural boundaries. IE does not approach discovery in the lineaments of dominant discourse which articulate perspectives separate from experience. Instead, IE draws on experience to disclose how activities are organized and "articulated to the social relations of the larger social and economic process" (Smith, 1987, p. 151-152). The following sections introduce institutional ethnography, its' applications, and concludes with implications for practice.

Institutional Ethnography

Devault and McCoy (2001) describe institutional ethnography as "the empirical investigation of linkages among local settings of everyday life, organizations, and translocal processes of administration" (p. 751). Drawing from ethnomethodology, IE focuses on how everyday experience is socially organized, attempting to understand how the coordination and intersection of work processes, activities, and relations organized around a specific function (such as education, welfare, law, social work, health care, etc.) and occurring in multiple sites form part of the ruling apparatus in society (Grahame & Grahame, 2000). The guiding question for an institutional ethnographer is "how does this happen as it does? How are these relations organized" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 7). In answering these types of questions, institutional ethnographers rely on the influence of paradigms such as social organization literature, critical theorists Marx and Foucault, and feminist discourse. According to a social organization framework, social relations are systematic processes and practices that manage and control people's lives through ruling relations "more or less mysteriously and outside a person's knowledge" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 18). *Ruling relations* are defined as the textual venues (such as legislation, governing boards, program planners, management, administration) where power is generated and perpetuated in society across multiple sites. Within this framework, researchers acknowledge that social life is not chaotic but is purposefully organized to happen as it does. Power becomes critically important as an analytic focus- illuminating practices that marginalize and making visible how ruling relations are transported through knowledge, experience, discourse, and institutions.

In examining relations of ruling, institutional ethnographers examine texts. In its many forms, texts disclose how power is embedded within social institutions and structures. Materially, texts are documents (any kind of document on paper, electronic file, artistic representation, law, academia, policy) or representations that have the ability to be reproduced, copied, transferred, disseminated by different users at different times (Grahame & Grahame,

2000). Symbolically, texts function to organize and dictate social and cultural space for particular individuals and groups. Texts transport power in ideologies and practices across sites and among people. The power of a text is translocal and can be viewed similar to Foucault's (1967) explanation:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of *articulation* [italics added]. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (p. 234)

Smith's notion of activation is similar to the notion of articulation mentioned by Foucault (1967). Activation posits that the human factor is the enabler of a text's ability to coordinate action and get things done in specific ways. For example, welfare recipients have cards which qualify them for certain social services and connect them to institutions of larger social relations. The card is powerful only when recipients know how to use it and service providers know how to respond. This exchange is seen as activation; the text is used to coordinate recipients' benefits with services and ultimately activities the recipient is permitted to engage in. The next section examines applications of IE and how texts have defining power in people's lives.

Application of IE

Human capital theory pervades job training policy and continues to ascribe the burden of being unemployed to "unskilled workers" lack of education and skills rather than a poor education system, or discrimination in the job market which keeps people from gaining skills. These assumptions are transported through funded research reports, such as *Workforce 2000*, and research institutes that wield influence over job training policy, ultimately having implications for training participants. A statement from the report reads:

The workers who will join the labor force between now and the year 2000 are not well matched to the jobs that the economy is creating. A gap is emerging between the relatively low education and skills of new workers (many of whom are disadvantaged) and the advancing skills requirements of the new economy. (Johnston & Packer, 1987, p. 75)

This statement not only negates the life skills and other skills that participants may bring, but also renders invisible "the mediating role the state plays in managing the relation between capital and labor through how skill comes to be managed" (Grahame & Grahame, 2000, p. 5).

In a study of employment training programs, Grahame and Grahame (2000) examined "the notion of skill" and "how official knowledge operates in [the] practice ... of job training" (p. 4). IE explored how the skill deficit-model permeates employment training discourse, policy, and program planning efforts and is projected toward the disadvantaged (poor, racial/ethnic minorities, women). Studying Asian immigrant women, Grahame and Grahame (2000)

discovered that participants entered employment training with a variety of skills and that there was a discrepancy between the Asian immigrants' perceptions of their skill needs and the perception of the employment training system. Although participants and the community agencies recognized that English language proficiency was the most pressing need of the Asian participants, enrollment for English language skills was prohibited by the state because this was not permissible based on parameters set by job training agencies. Programs continued to be developed around emphasizing work habits and not English language proficiency. Thus, through these practices, dominant views around skills and jobs were maintained and participants' needs ignored. In this instance, IE analyzed how political discourse and organizational knowledge on macro levels translate into micro practices that distance educational access, govern actual employment opportunity, and shape participant's quality of life.

Similar to the study of social processes in training programs is a study by Darville (1995) on the social organization of literacy. Initially, literacy was used as a way to exert power and establish social and political hierarchy, imposing societal limitations on those who were illiterate. Over time, the conceptualization of literacy has been primarily associated with workforce development; and has increasingly become a critical and problematic issue for those entering the workforce without necessary skills (Askov, 2000). Primarily associating literacy with workforce development ignores other types and functions of literacy such as those used in cultural, communal, and spiritual contexts and literacy achieved through informal means or for achievement of personal goals (Askov, 2000). The lack of consensus surrounding what it means to be literate is equally discouraging because "how literacy is assessed actually indicates how it is being defined" (Askov, 2000, p. 249).

Darville (1995), in a study of how literacy is organized, used IE to explore how the lack of certain "forms of literacy constitutes disempoweredness in our society" (p. 250). Specifically focusing on organizational literacy, Darville (1995) examined how organizational literacy, which constitutes knowledge of regulations, contracts, policies, licenses, judicial procedures/decisions, and discourse jargon, is usually exclusive of those with certain cultural and social experiences. He argued that although individuals may be versed in various forms of literacy: religious, informal community life, or organization, without functional literacy marginalization and exclusion will continue. Functional literacy encompasses the ability to understand both covert and overt organizational dialogue, documents, and processes in order to navigate the social and cultural landscape. "Literacy is like currency" (Darville, 1995, p. 254); it has worth and can be transferred. Without it, there is immobility.

Holland and Redish (as cited in Darville, 1995, p. 256) studied the experiences of "experts" and "novices" in filling out job applications. Darville (1995) explained that in order to competently fill out the application, there must be an understanding of how the application is used. The 'experts' completed the application with knowledge of what employers look for or what will gain you an advantage. The 'novice' was constrained solely to completing the items on the application and excluded beneficial information. Darville (1995) concluded that the applicants completed applications based on experience, "not to the ways that they will be viewed in an organizational process. . . . Their difficulty is not in reading skills in a rudimentary sense, but practical knowledge about how certain information is organizationally relevant, how it will be used" (p. 257). He made further reference to how an individual may misread and misunderstand an organizational memo unrelated to their line of work. Darville (1995) argued that "anyone may be rendered illiterate and powerless when they face writing that is constructed for purposes that are mysterious to the reader" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 12).

Thus, in teaching literacy, Darville (1995) argued for workers to guide students, not solely in reading in writing, but in understanding the significance of how organizations employ and use knowledge. Darville (1995) argued that conventional methods of teaching literacy fail students when teachers dismiss the additional responsibility of showing students how organizational literacy dominates them. How organizations utilize material to get their work done is a form of literacy that is immobilizing if an individual is unaware of its functions. Drawing on IE's liberatory aim, Darville (1995) encouraged literacy workers to teach literacy as a form of social analysis that fosters student political action. Since IE does not treat a knower's location as a problem of bias, but as an issue of power that reveals whose interests is being served, Darville (1995) suggests using student narratives as an entryway into investigating the practices around literacy that impact a student's social and economic advancement. Beyond rudimentary functions within academia, IE was used to foster pedagogical reflection and practice which becomes liberatory for students.

Benefits and Implications

IE makes an important contribution to the field of adult education and human resource development by demonstrating its ability to (a) address both micro and macro contexts, (b) connect issues across multiple sites, (c) uncover the ability of texts to shape and control lives in unrecognized ways, and (d) provide practical tools to foster change at the local level. As adult participation along cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines becomes more diverse, the field's challenge is to think more politically (Amstutz, 1999), making the issue of learner and social context more critical. IE can address long-standing concerns in adult education of why some individuals do not participate by understanding the ruling relations that shape and organize learners' experiences. With the increased role of adult educators in welfare-to-work reform, IE research can illuminate how policy or administrative procedures in training programs stifle the learning and autonomy pursued by its participants by carrying dominant ideologies into program planning, design, and instruction. Additionally, IE can provide a practical map, outlining current adult education practices or pedagogically driven techniques that are ineffective for learners on the margins.

Uncovering ways that ruling relations intersect within organizations may be a fundamental insight into issues of learning and performance. How knowledge and power interact across multiple settings to inhibit performance or effective interpersonal relations related to team learning is an important topic of study (see Brooks, 1997). Understanding how federal policies, such as the family leave act, shape the way that women are treated in organizations may reveal factors that impact women's work performance and career advancement opportunities within the organization. With increased interest in domestic violence at work, IE can also serve as an effective framework for investigating how the administrative practices of the criminal justice system collide with organizational processes to influence women's educational and employment success. Using institutional ethnography can contribute to our understanding of micro and macro social systems and institutional relations that shape individual experience. IE can assist adult educators in finding ways to change our lives and the lives of others- individually, organizationally, and socially.

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